Interest Groups

1. **The Ubiquity of Interest Groups**

In general, interest groups are a collection of people trying to influence the government. Interest groups provide a critical link between citizens and government.

In general, an individual has little influence over policy outcomes and government.

When individuals form a group, they can have a great deal of influence.

Because everyone wants something from government, interest groups exist in all types of societies.

Even dictatorships have interest groups, although they may behave in ways that are very different from how they behave in open societies.

When we talk about interest groups, we generally mean any group that is trying to influence government.

This is an important point, because Americans frequently use the term "special interest" to refer to groups they do not like that are trying to influence government, but in practice we are all special interests.

* 1. **Interest Groups and Political Parties**

Interest groups differ from political parties in several ways.

Interest groups seek to influence policy but do not seek to control government. This occur outside of the electoral process. They are not accountable to the public.

They have a stake in outcomes but do not seek to run candidates under a party label.

They do seek to influence elections by contributing money to campaigns, often to both sides in an effort to guarantee access.

Interest groups are rarely represented in the structure of government.

There are no limits on the number of interest groups (the right of association) and there are over 20,000 interest groups in Washington, DC.

Interest group membership tends to be very narrow.

Some states foster the development of interest groups in society.

* 1. **Who Belongs to Interest Groups?**

Having interests is part of human nature and the great diversity of interests that exist in society lends itself naturally to group formation.

Pluralist theories of interest groups suggest that a host of interest groups compete with each other for access to government. As a consequence, no single group is able to dominate politics.

Policy outcomes are the result of this competition of interests.

Pluralism is good in theory, but in practice the playing field is not level among interest groups.

Wealthy people who tend to be better educated and have much higher levels of political competency are far more likely to organize to advocate for their interests.

The poor in society lack those organizing skills and are often cut out of the political process.

This can lead to outbursts of political violence, such as the storming of the Bastille prior to the French Revolution.

1. **Interest Groups and Government**

For interest group activity to be beneficial, there must be a state worth influencing.

Weak states, where crime has interpenetrated politics, have groups that try to influence government, but that influence group activity is not necessarily beneficial.

As government grows, interest groups proliferate.

The funding of programs creates constituencies that want to see the programs continue.

Reagan tried to defund the Department of Education but was unsuccessful due to heavy interest group resistance.

Interest groups can on occasion participate in government.

When interest groups take over some of the functions of government, it is known as corporatism.

DEF: *corporatism is the direct participation of interest groups in government*

Ex. The Swedish Royal Commissions

* 1. **Government-Created Interest Groups**

Not all interest groups are independent: some are created by the actions of government.

Government creates programs to serve the needs of citizens. Those programs develop interest constituencies that form groups to advocate for the program. The groups then lobby Congress.

Ex. Mac and Fannie Mae were U.S. farm subsidies used to get out of the Depression in the 1930s.

Ex. Political Engineering for the F-35 project.

* 1. **Bureaucrats as an Interest Group**

Bureaucrats themselves can act as interest groups: they do this through their input in the making and implementation of laws.

Ex. Japan's ministries are extremely powerful.

Bureaucracies can develop their own interests, especially with respect to seeing their agencies continue and their budgets expand.

Interest groups can be offshoots of government as a result.

1. **Effective Interest Groups**

Factors which make interest groups effective

POLTICAL CULTURE:

A country's political culture affects the likelihood of the development of interest groups: interest groups flourish in open societies with little state control over group formation.

Ex. Americans and Britons are more likely to join associations than Italians or French.

There have been some worries about the decline of associational life in the United States.

In societies that have a tradition of people joining groups, citizens tend to have higher levels of political efficacy (*the feeling that what one does can make a difference*)

THE RISE OF BIG MONEY:

Money is probably the single most important factor in determining the success of an interest group (especially important during elections).

The importance of money in elections has led to worries that politics is basically becoming the best government that money can buy.

Some countries have tried various reforms, including limiting campaign spending, subsidizing political parties, and public funding of elections.

The United States has been very resistant to public financing of campaigns: this is primarily due to the speech issues that arise with respect to the First Amendment to the Constitution.

An accompanying problem is the cost of elections in the United States.

Consequently, political leaders in the United States have been unable to agree on a formula for controlling money in politics.

A relatively new development has been the rise of PACs (*U.S interest groups set up specifically to contribute to election campaigns*) and Super PACs.

These groups, because of tax laws, are able to donate soft money (*campaign contributions to parties to skirt federal limits on contributions to candidates),* money not regulated by the FEC, to groups not working directly with a candidate.

The 2002 McCain-Feingold Campaign Finance Reform Act was a bipartisan attempt to regulate campaign spending in the United States.

It was challenged in the Courts and was found to be constitutional, but subsequent rulings by the Court had rendered the act essentially irrelevant by 2004.

Super PACs spend millions of dollars on independent ads that denounce opponents.

The larger question is whether or not money is out of control in politics: pluralists argue that in the end, the amount of money has no real effect on politics because the interest groups are in constant competition with each other and no single group is able to dominate politics.

THE RISE OF SINGLE-ISSUE GROUPS:

The 1970s saw the rise of single-issue interest groups (*interest associations devoted to one cause only*) in U.S politics.

Issue intensity is extremely important with respect to interest groups as groups that care most intensely about an issue are more committed and gain the attention of politicians and decision makers.

Most single-issue groups are focused on moral issues, for example abortion, which makes compromise on politics very difficult.

SIZE AND MEMBERSHIP:

The size of a group does matter when it comes to being effective in the interest group game, and large groups such as the AARP (American Association of Retired Persons) have a lot of clout.

Size is not the only thing and group size can be countered by other resources, especially money and intensity.

The socioeconomic status of members is also important: disadvantaged groups are often some of the largest groups in American politics but lack the time, money, and organizational skills to form an interest group and as such often have the least influence.

ACCESS:

All groups in the system want access to decision makers in order to influence policy outcomes.

Much of the money contributed to campaigns is not about results but rather about gaining access.

Structured access (*long-term friendly connection of interest groups to officials*), an idea advanced by LaPalombara, greatly improves their chances of success in achieving their goals.

1. **Interest Group Strategies:**

Strategies Interest Groups use:

APPROACHING LAWMAKERS:

Most of the time when we think about interest groups, we think about them trying to influence legislators to pass (or not pass) a law.

Approaching lawmakers is the traditional interest group strategy: many are convinced that lobbyists buy Congress and get whatever they want.

When a major interest is threatened by new laws or proposed changes in laws, they will spare no expense to work to prevent it from happening. They are usually successful in their efforts.

Money buys access to lawmakers, increasing the effectiveness of well-funded groups to advocate for their interests.

APPROACHING THE ADMINISTRATION:

Sometimes it is in a group's interest to approach and lobby (*interest group effort to sway legislation*) the administration rather than Congress.

This occurs when groups do not necessarily want a new law but rather just a favourable interpretation of an existing law or regulation.

They use many of the same tactics that they would use on legislators in this process, like personal contacts, research and public relations.

APPROACHING THE JUDICIARY:

The courts are not immune from the influence of interest groups, and some groups have relied heavily on the courts to achieve their goals.

Interest groups can file class-action lawsuits, which are legal actions on behalf of a group or class of citizens, to try to force the courts to take action to correct a wrongdoing.

Interest groups can also file amicus curiae briefs, which are also called friend of the court briefs. Amicus briefs allow the interest groups to submit to the court for consideration legal arguments on cases that affect their interests.

Ex. The NAACP used the courts to fight for changes to laws that promoted discrimination.

APPEALS TO THE PUBLIC:

Sometimes groups do not go to decision makers but rather go public with their causes and arguments.

Some interest groups maintain a low profile by promoting their objectives without advertising themselves. Such groups may plant news stories that promote their cause and quietly work against the publication of stories detrimental to them.

Ex. the ads run by BP after the Deepwater Horizon explosion / the tobacco industry.

DEMONSTRATIONS:

Some groups do not have the resources to fund a media campaign, but they can still take their cases to the public.

Public demonstrations are one way they can do this.

The nonviolent protests led by Gandhi and MLK Jr. are both examples of how public demonstrations can raise the awareness of the general citizenry to an issue and increase the chances that decision makers will change policies.

VIOLENT PROTEST:

When groups lose faith in the system, peaceful demonstrations can move to violent protests. This strategy can work in occasions where there is a psychological build-up and a general sense of injustice.

Ex. the Great Society Legislation was passed during a period of urban riots in the United States.

1. **Interest groups: an evaluation**

Interest group activity is at the core of democracy, but it is important to think about how well interest groups serve the public.

There are several ways in which an interest group might fail to serve the interests of the public.

* There is bias in the system and some groups, especially small groups, do not have any input into the process.
* Some people, the poor for example, cannot organize into groups because they lack the time, money, and political competency to do so. This means that their interests are not represented in the system and politicians can ignore those interests. (ex. Common Cause was founded as a citizens' public interest group.)
* Some groups may be led by a highly militant and radical leadership that has views that vary considerably with what members actually want. This can lead to a split between leadership and membership within the group.

1. **Skewing Policy**

Interest groups can skew policy in their favour regardless of which party is in power.

This occurs because groups often donate money to both main political parties in the hopes of assuring access to decision makers regardless of who wins the election.

Even a political party that might favour the interest of the poor is going to be more likely to pass legislation favouring the wealthy due to that interest group's influence.

1. **Stalemating Political Power**

Interest groups can also contribute to a stalemating of political power because leaders may be beholden to so many groups that they will be reluctant to act on any controversial issue out of fear of alienating multiple powerful interest groups.

Government can get stuck, trapped between powerful interests’ ad unable to move on important issues.